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A Zero-Based Threat to Nicaragua's Junta

By Dial Torgerson

SAN JOSE, Costa Rica—The man the Sandinista government of Nicaragua fears the most—the man it calls “the traitor”—has started a do-it-yourself insurrection in southern Nicaragua. He is Eden Pastora, once the Sandinistas’ “Commander Zero,” and he has carved out a base of operations for his guerrillas without the assistance, apparently, of the United States.

The people the Sandinistas seem to fear the least—the people they call “the beasts”—are shooting up northern Nicaragua with extensive aid from the CIA. They are part of the Nicaraguan Democratic Force, whose field commanders include former officers in the National Guard of the late Anastasio Somoza, the man Pastora helped the Sandinistas oust in 1979.

Pastora quit the Sandinistas a year ago because of their drift toward Marxism and Cuba, and now he is trying to overthrow them. A hero of the Sandinista revolution—he once held the entire Nicaraguan legislature hostage to force the release of jailed colleagues—Pastora says his aim is to hurl out the Marxist ideologues he says “betrayed the Sandinista revolution.”

Diplomats and military observers here in San Jose, where Pastora plotted his current guerrilla campaign, say that his is the more significant threat to the Sandinista directorate in Managua. The Sandinistas tend to exaggerate the depredations of “the beasts” but have committed only militiamen and barely trained reservists to fight them.

The people of Nicaragua fear and despise the former Somoza officers—the “Somocistas,” as they call them. But many remember with warmth the charismatic Commander Zero. The graffiti the Sandinistas cannot keep off the walls of Managua proclaim, “Eden lives,” or “Zero is coming.”

Yet, according to Pastora's people, the United States, which describes the Sandinistas as the greatest threat to peace in Central America, has to date offered no assistance to Pastora and his political backers. If the United States seriously wants to get rid of the Sandinistas, why isn't it helping Pastora?

Officially, the Reagan Administration contends that it is helping the counterrevolutionary bands in the north so that they can interdict the flow of arms from Nicaragua to rebels in El Salvador. Congress has voted against the use of U.S. funds to support any attempt to overthrow the Sandinistas.

The Nicaraguan Democratic Force, it is generally agreed, is now a harassment, not a real threat to the Sandinista directorate. If the Reagan Administration does not really want to overthrow the Sandinistas, it is spending its millions with the right people.

But that is not the real reason the Administration does not want to help Pastora and the groups working with him. U.S. officials are frank about their antipathy to Pastora. They say he is too revolutionary, too nationalistic, too difficult.

Franklin D. Roosevelt is said to have said of a 1930s Latin American dictator, “He's an S.O.B., but he's *our* S.O.B.” The Reagan Administration, it is clear, fears that Pastora might not be *ours*.

The Reagan Administration is also suspicious of Pastora's use of terms like “revolutionary.” Although Pastora's professed goals are the promises the Sandinistas have failed to keep—free elections, a multiparty system, a mixed economy, free speech—to many people in the Administration he is too left of center.

Alfonso Robelo, who heads the political side of the anti-Sandinista alliance in the south, has said:

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